

A SONG TO REMEMBER

ASHLY OLSON

It's mid-July and the sun has started to dip under the fir trees. My windows are all down, including my sunroof. The warm air swirls around me, and for once, I'm not worried about the way my hair is being tossed from one side to the other. I'm headed down the key peninsula highway, driving roughly 50 mph, even though the maximum is 45. I feel a tug in my chest as I turn up the radio, letting my mind wander as I make my way closer and closer to the Purdy spit.

I'm just clearing the Wauna curves, or as I call them the black hole, due to my inability to use cellular devices while driving through the winding road. I've now hit the last little bit of road before I make my decent down the hill to the end of the Key Peninsula Highway. To my left is a massive field, one I remember from multiple renaissance fairs when I was younger. But more so what catches my attention is the sudden change of the air around me as the song on the radio switches from Mike Posner's "Cooler than me," to the smooth melody of Coldplay's "Viva La Vida".

I'm in my grandmother's beauty shop, having woken up suddenly in the night. Usually I'm such a good sleeper, but a lot has been on my mind lately. I'm fifteen, just starting high school, and I'm still trying to put my priorities in place. It must be at least 1:00 am. I rub my eye, flinching as the crusty "sand" is gritty against my tender skin. My grandfather, who is in his late seventies, hunches over our computer, which is currently in the far left corner of the room on its desk. There is only one light on, casting a yellow light just on the keyboard and then slightly out on the floor. It's strangely darker than usual and I can feel the unmoving air on my face as I press myself through the doorway. He doesn't hear me, until I hit the floorboard two steps in and he turns.

"Hi hunny bun, whatcha doing up so late?" I squint, trying to see what he is doing on the computer and immediately realize he's on YouTube.

"I'm not sure. Hey, what are you doing on there grandpa?" As quickly as I say it, he's waving me over and pointing down at the keyboard.

"Hey can you look something up for me?" I'm suddenly intrigued, what could he possibly be wanting to look up at 1:00 on YouTube?

"Sure thing, what are you trying to look up?"

"Music." He replies quickly.

He looks up at me and I realize he seems to be longing, there's desperation on his face I haven't seen before.

"Yeah, YouTube has music on it." I find myself unsure what else to say. Every millennial child knows the ins and outs of YouTube and it's strange to be talking about this with my grandfather.

"Well, there is this song that's been stuck in my head lately, I've heard it on the radio a few times now and I'd really love to hear it again." His voice trails off near the end, becoming almost like a whisper.

"Do you know what song it is?" I bend down and place my hand on my grandfathers black scruffy robe.

"Oh yes, it's Viva La Vida by Coldplay." Ok, that's simple enough I think to myself. I immediately grab the mouse, scrolling to the search bar. He is instantly annoyed, asking me to slow down and show him how to do it, "so I can do this myself next time" he pleads.

I blink and I'm back in my 1988 Acura Legend, going 50 mph down the beginning of the large hill that leads to the spit. I've traveled over a mile, not even consciously driving the car, and I shake my head trying to erase the memory from my head. The air inside the cab has eerily stilled and I slowly press down on the brake, accounting for the drag on my car as I take the first winding corner. My hands are going numb from holding onto the wheel so tightly and from the drumming of the car.

The buzzing is vibrating every one of my ribs. I close my eyes and squeeze my boyfriend's hand to steady my breathing. I'm lying down on my side in some dark, cramped tattoo shop. The artist's name, I believe, is Jesse. Today is my 18th birthday, this is not necessarily what I thought I'd be doing, but I couldn't stand the idea of being home on a day like this. In the back room I hear my cousin say "I'm ready" and seconds later a sharp exhale of air escapes her and I'm sure a needle has been shoved through her navel. I'm trying to stay in the moment,

but my mind seems to be wandering so easily lately. I feel the dig and pull of the needle as it rips across my ribs. Such a great spot to get my first, the guy, Jesse, had said. I didn't care; I just wanted this over with so I could leave.

He has a hand on the top of my ribs as the other drags and pulls through my tanned skin again. A tattoo gun runs approximately 60 strokes per minute, so for my three inch long tattoo he'd make roughly 180 strokes with his needle, but I could feel it again as he went over my already tender skin packing in more ink. For something I'd have on my the rest of my life, I'd discreetly placed it along the side of my ribs, where I know my bra would cover it. My side begins to go numb as the artist traces and retraces the intricate line work I've chosen "Viva La Vida", meaning long live life, still not coming close to the ache in my heart. The air I breathe in getting softer and softer.

I reach across my chest with my left hand placing it over the spot I know it lays. "Never an honest word, But that was when I ruled the world," Chris Martin belts as the end of the chorus finishes. Chimes and symbols sound before the next line begins. I've finished going down the hill and am greeted by a glassy cove to my left and the open Puget Sound to my right. I'll be driving right between the barriers of the two as I've done so many, yet this summer afternoon is filled with a different feeling that I haven't had in a long time. The warm air that is surrounding me is buoyant with a different sense than usual, and the song being blasted through my speakers is the transporter of it all. I could reach out and caress the memories of what is being held here, bottling up all the emotions and times that is being held within them.

I'm back in the shop, watching my grandfather as he leans over the computer. "For some reason I can't explain, I know Saint Peter won't call my name" the line says and I can suddenly see he is crying. This isn't the first time, since showing him how to look up the song, that I've seen him playing it. Strangely enough, it's always late and night, when everyone is supposedly asleep, that he makes his way to the back room and flicks on the song. The room's air is thick and hangs with regret. I'm just a bystander watching my grandfather melt as the lyrics stream from the speakers. I watch him for a long while, but I never get the chance to ask why he listens to this song in particular, over and over again.

I'm driving fast, faster than 50 mph, and my grandmother says "slow down, I don't want to die before I even get there!" The van hums and lurches along the dark pavement as I head down the peninsula highway towards the Purdy spit. I wind down the hill and see the dark water, churning fast. Much like how I feel, my heart and breathing has taken on a different rhythm than usual. A person at rest takes between 12 and 20 breaths per minute, anything above 25 breaths per minute indicates a person in distress, and anything below is abnormally slow breathing rate known as bradypnea. We enter the ICU, my grandfather was intubated and hooked to many machines before we arrived. It is a shock to my system, and suddenly my ability to comprehend the events lying before me dissipates. He's restrained-a fighter till the end. 15 breaths per minute, up and down his chest goes, but not like mine, too robotic. There is a different feeling in the hospital room, inevitable, unchanging, a sense of finality.

I finish over the spit, taking a quick right to head towards the freeway. Viva La Vida is reaching its end and I can almost imagine that this man-my adoptive father "was my mirror, my sword and shield" sitting beside me. The air in the car resumes its movement, twirling my hair into a thousand knots, as I press the pedal down, revving the engine past 55 mph, turning onto the highway and back to the life after all the disarray.